

# Focusing free childcare on 'working parents' is short-sighted <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

As part of its plan to get more people into work, the government is forging ahead with a pre-election pledge to double the current 15 hours per week of free childcare to 30 hours for working parents.

The 2015-16 Childcare Bill, currently making its way through parliament, does not extend the eligibility criteria to all parents. In its current form, the bill introduces a "duty to secure 30 hours free childcare available for working parents". The definition of "working parents" is, as yet, unclear.

Unlike the relatively standardised and supply-led childcare arrangements in most EU countries, in the UK, parents are reimbursed through the tax and benefit system for childcare purchased in the open market, where fees are set by providers to maximise profitability. Parents can receive financial help directly and other subsidies go directly to childcare providers through the "early years entitlement". This provides three- and four-year-olds and disadvantaged two-year-olds with 15 hours of childcare (for 38 weeks of the year).

There is clearly high demand for quality childcare services, but there are worries over the capacity for the sector to expand and the quality of scaled-up provision.

Critically, aside from the current baseline of 15 hours of free childcare, the remainder of state-funded help for childcare is tied to being in work. This suggests that the government sees childcare largely as a support strategy for employed parents. But for parents in education, training, seeking a job or starting a business, having quality childcare in place is essential before they can undertake these activities.

If the government is assuming equal economic participation of parents and non-parents, of both men and women, then limiting access to childcare intensifies a segregation between employed and unemployed parents, and parents with uneven working patterns, such as those with shift work or zero-hours contracts. Framing the policy in this way ignores children's needs, disrupts children's daily lives (as parents move in and out of work) and puts high pressure on parents.

### Childcare costs keep on rising

Most families with children aged under three wishing to use childcare will still be reliant on either self-payment, employer-provided vouchers or the new tax-free childcare scheme. However, this scheme is now scheduled to be introduced in autumn 2017, rather than 2015 and will actually leave some parents worse off.

This is problematic, as childcare in the UK is among the most expensive in the world. The Family and Childcare Trust's 2015 Childcare Cost Survey showed that over the last parliament the cost of a part-time nursery place for a child aged under two had increased by 33% and for the first time childcare costs broke the £6,000-a-year barrier, averaging £115.45 a week across Britain. This represents a rise of 5.1% in a single year.

The proposed change also leaves untouched the problem of the availability of before- and after-school care for older children. The Family and Childcare Trust Annual Holiday Costs Survey 2014 found that holiday childcare is 1.7% more expensive than in 2013, with the average holiday club now costing £114.51 per week. Additionally, 35% of parents found it difficult to find affordable holiday childcare and only 27% of English and 6% of Welsh local authorities had enough holiday childcare for working parents. The situation is even more acute for parents with disabled children or with school-aged children in rural areas.

Other countries, including some of the Nordics, have a simple system of a sliding fee scale for both daycare and after-school care that is based on parents' income. The Commission for Childcare Reform in Scotland is demonstrating that there are alternatives to the English and Welsh models. It is proposing up to 50 hours of free or subsidised childcare a week, a sliding fee scale and a child account for each child, to provide a transparent route through which childcare funds will be channelled to providers. The Scottish government will publish its response to the commissions's recommendations in the coming months.

Supporting parents to raise the next generation is a social investment. We could look at the doubling of the free childcare entitlement as a step towards universal childcare, through the policy's emphasis on improving access. However, the policy's aims seem paradoxical.

By introducing their shared parental leave scheme, the coalition government said it aimed to challenge the status quo of mothers sharing the bulk of parenting responsibilities. In this new policy, however, a strategic approach to active fatherhood is conspicuously absent: the economic implications of both shared parental leave and childcare policy both compound gender inequality.

Appropriate for every age

If the government's focus is on child development and well-being, then not extending access to more free childcare to all children, but only those whose parents are "working", suggests that quality childcare is not seen as an essential public service.

Reframing childcare as early "education" rather than "early years education and care" and time for play, Ofsted's chief inspector has argued that this should be delivered solely in schools. But repositioning childcare as an educational programme "for the poorest" could be a barrier to a progressive childcare system.

By taking playtime out of the picture it does not contribute to a broader vision for early learning and care, associated with nurturing, safety, play and creativity: all necessary preconditions for wider support for public childcare. It is also contrary to the direction of other countries that have based childcare on particular pedagogical principles, such as Denmark. Along with availability, affordability, accessibility and quality, ensuring that childcare uses practices that are developmentally appropriate to each age group should be a critical principle guiding debate about the early years.

-reprinted from The Conversation

**Region:** Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** maternity and parental leave <sup>[4]</sup>

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